

The Last Time We Saw Elisabethville

Placid City with a Prosperous Jewish Community

By PAT DORRIS

It is difficult to believe that the placid little town at Elisabethville, at the southern end of the Congo, has for the last few days been the scene of horror and atrocities. It is painful to think that some of the people whom we met there two years ago may now be in danger of their lives.

We met many different kinds of people. There were the members of the Jewish community, who entertained us with a blend of cordial hospitality and continental urbanity. There were the hard-working Belgian civil servants and officials, looking forward to the time when they could go home. There were the smiling Congolese themselves, whom we saw playing energetic football in the new stadium or dancing up for the Sunday evening exhibition of native dances.

Charming but Expensive

Elisabethville looks as though it had been transferred bodily from Flanders. It has a less "mild" charm coupled with the highest costs of living in the world. Its streets are colourful with the garb of its African inhabitants and the abundantowering trees and shrubs of Africa. Its main hotel, a little down at heel but comfortable at least until last week—served good food and ice-cold beer, but almost all the food and certainly most of the fruit and vegetables had been flown either from Britain or from South Africa.

Among the tourist attractions of the town are the Zoo and the Museum. The Zoo is famous because it has a rare sheep, a peculiar animal which is a cross between zebra and giraffe. The Museum is both an art and a natural history museum. It has an excellent collection of ancient artifacts which are housed after lovingly by the erudit Belgian scholars. As you enter the geological section of the Museum, the attendant takes away your watch and your camera. You soon discover the reason—the first exhibit is a massive piece of sinister looking pitchblende, which has a degree of radioactivity likely to expose any man on your camera. The pitchblende is the ore from which uranium was first obtained. The next exhibit is an enormous boulder of almost pure copper—the Katanga deposits have the highest copper content in the world.

Model African Town

The visitor to Elisabethville is taken to see the other sights of which the Belgian administration was proud. We saw the African town, with its modest housing schemes laid out according to a protocol based on the salary scales in the mines. Some 4,000 Africans own their own houses here. The houses were compact and well-kept. Children played happily in the middle of the road. Contented-looking housewives exchanged gossip and passed the time of day (in fair French) as they squatted, plaiting each other's hair.

We saw the health clinics, staffed with dozens of prospective mothers awaiting their turn to see the doctor. We saw the local law-courts. We saw the major attraction of the Congolese town—the house of its African mayor, a two-storey home in modern style, which any large would have been happy to own.

We visited the Art School (L'Ecole des Beaux Arts) where a dedicated Belgian artist displayed to us proudly the work of his young Congolese pupils who were learning not only painting,

modelling and sculpture based on traditional tribal themes, but also modern painting. The Congolese are an artistic folk and no-one who stands at one of the air-bars, even for half an hour, fails to buy some of the gay and decorative wares which are the work of native artists. We spent an hour at the dance-display on the Monday morning, fascinated by the colourful costumes and the African rhythms. It was interesting to note the number of dances performed by women only, and on our way to the Synagogue news, built by the Union Miniere for the benefit of its workers, we passed a colourful market scene where exotic fruits and vegetables were being sold by groups of women. Most of the menfolk seemed to have congregated in the numerous bistros and bars that lined the streets. Two years ago, there seemed to be no rancour or resentment against the non-African, and everywhere we were greeted with smiling friendliness.

Jews from Rhodes

The main purpose of our visit to Elisabethville at that time was to join the Jewish community in its celebrations of Israel's tenth anniversary.

The community numbered then about one thousand souls, out of the town's 10,000 total population.

The synagogue (for the most part oriental-looking, dark little shops) are owned by Jews, as are the Congo's biggest textile mills. Everywhere we saw the Israel flag decorating the shop windows in honour of Independence Day. We were taken on arrival to see the town's War Memorial, at which the community had

placed a wreath to commemorate those who fell in Israel's War of Independence. The Governor, the Mayor and the President of the University had also laid wreaths at a ceremony held the day before.

Most of Elisabethville's Jews are Sephardim who came to the Congo from the Island of Rhodes or from Turkey and Egypt. There are two or three Ashkenazi families who have assimilated to the Sephardic way of life, their identity to "Congo style."

There was one kosher-cooked chicken brought by the Chief Rabbi's wife.

It was at this hall that I had one memorable if bizarre conversation. A middle-aged gentleman had asked me to dance and asked if I remembered him. "You met us at the airport," "Mais, Madame," he said reproachfully. "Je suis un Juif," he added. As a result, I shall always think of Elisabethville as the place where I danced with the Chief Rabbi's wife.

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We have several mementos of our visit to the Congo. The one we like best is the painting in oils, by an African artist of the tall and elongated Watutsi dancers. It is sad to think that at the moment, all the verve and vitality displayed by these dancers has been turned to such tragic ends.

Active Zionists

There is a great deal of interest in Israel and one of the main attractions of the town is the Israel Museum.

Martin Bernstein, the head of the Congo's flourishing Zionist Association, while his wife is the energetic leader of the local Wizo organization. On the Shabbat, we spent the afternoon with the local group of Habonim, a lively group of young people who wore a curious uniform that was a combination of

part in creating one of the most powerful dances we have witnessed in the last few years.

After that, anything would have been something of an anticlimax, but the public was led back into the fun of life.

"Shindig" is a lively, sparkling scene with a lot of dancing, acrobatics and laughter, giving an opportunity to pretty Irene von Klenau and Ballerina Christine Hennessy to show their graceful talents, well assisted by the gifted men of the company and the corps de ballet, acting this time as Can-Can girls. All in all, the company has distinct promise and should develop its modern resources.

Mr. Tozzi has a fine voice with which he rendered the operatic arias impressively, but when it came to an unaccompanied Italian folk-song he gave as an encore. Alas! it was not only out of pitch.

Mr. Bloomfield is a young and gifted conductor who already seems to have acquired a great deal of experience. He gave a clear if not too refined a rendering of the Mozart overture and accompaniment of the "Pistone," so that the performance was not equilibrated at all and left no impression.

The Dvorak Symphony, however, was a satisfying interpretation, perhaps a little refined but full of effect: it raised an enthusiastic reception from the audience.

AVIDOM

American Ballet

The American Festival Ballet (Birnbaum-Bacon Concert Hall, Jerusalem, July 6).

After experiencing some

disappointments in the past, we eye unknown companies that have high-sounding names with suspicion: but this ensemble showed much talent and promise which are worth recording.

It is interesting to note that the most modern of the subjects, the better and stronger were the work of the young Congolese pupils who were learning not only painting,

well-meant and kept well in the tradition, but this ballet, in particular is as much the common property of every ballerina fan that only real top dancers and a large corps de ballet can stand up to comparisons favourably. The "Grand Pas de Deux, Don Quichotte"—dances to the accompaniment of very corny music and concluding no connection with Don Quichotte—gave Sonia Aron a brilliant opportunity to show some brilliant dance acrobatics, especially a marvellous sense of balance. She was ably seconded by Job Sanders.

Walter Goré, the choreographer, has original ideas and a good knowledge of stagecraft. His "Peep Show" was just good fun, lively and highly enjoyable. But, if anything, it is his "Dantes of Darkness" which gives him his company its *raison d'être*. A gripping drama based on a mental institution, with a rare insight into the afflictions of the human soul. It is put over with such intensity and complete conviction that the audience later sat through the intermission stunned and impressed. The choreography was masterly, and the use of the chorus as commentary and counterpoint to the happenings between the central figures was executed perfectly to the finest detail. Nothing was overdone, though the subject lent itself easily to this danger: the action, even in its quietest moments, was kept moving without effort and—without the help of the chorus—by the Benjamin Britten of the ballet will not easily be forgotten. Sonia Aron, as the wrongfully turned wife who is slowly going crazy, was up to the challenge. Job Sanders and the Aron Ross, as the protagonists in this fearful spectacle of the age-old attack and defense of the female species, were most impressive in their impersonations, and the chorus played a most valuable

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